

The music of the Muses

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Only two of the major Greek goddesses have a special musical mythology of their own. One is Athena, who was associated with the invention of the pipes called *auloi*. The other is a complex figure formed from a combination of at least three strands of legend and cult which were originally distinct. From very early times she was known to the Greeks as the Mother of the Gods; later her identity became fused with that of the corn-goddess Demeter; and she was identified also (at least from the fifth century BC) with the Anatolian mother-goddess Cybele. All the other immortal females who have special niches in musical myth come lower in the hierarchy of divinities; the most important are the Muses, the Charites and the Nereids, but there are also large numbers of lesser nymphs, and several more sinister beings such as Sirens and Erinyes.

My focus in this paper is on the Muses. They are best known as the source of inspiration for human poets and musicians, who continued to call on them for help long after any real belief in their existence had died; but this is not a theme I shall address. I want to concentrate instead on their own musical activities. What kinds of musical skill did they display in their performances? What were the central characteristics of their music? Where and when they perform it? I shall be mainly concerned with the so-called ‘archaic’ period of Greek civilization (roughly from the seventh century BC to the early fifth) which leads into the period we describe as ‘classical’; and at the centre of all our discussions will be a well-known passage, dating from the seventh century, at the beginning of Hesiod’s *Theogony* (lines 1-115).

Among the curious features of this introductory section of the *Theogony* is the fact that it seems to have at least three beginnings, at lines 1, 36 and 104, as if it had been put together from three separate ‘hymns to the Muses’; perhaps it was. If we consider first the question about where the Muses live and perform their music, the three parts seem to convey at least two different messages. In the first part they are the Muses ‘who possess the great and sacred mountain of Helikon’; they dance ‘on soft feet’, *πόσσι ἀπαλοῖσιν* (which I think means ‘barefoot’) around its streams and springs, and perform their lovely choral music, their *χόροι*, on its highest peak; at night they fly up

from it, veiled in clouds, singing their beautiful songs; and it was on the lower slopes of Mount Helikon in Boeotia that they had their famous meeting with Hesiod the shepherd. The second and longest part tells, among other things, of their birth in the home of their mother, Mnemosyne (whose name means ‘Memory’); and this is not on Helikon or anywhere in Boeotia, but much further north, in Pieria, ‘a little way from the highest peak of snowy Olympus’. That, we are now told, is where they have their homes and their λιπαρὰ χοροί, their ‘shining dance-grounds’. (We can be sure that in this passage χοροί does not mean ‘dances’ or ‘choruses’, but ‘places for choral dancing and singing’; in the *Iliad*, similarly (18.590), we hear of the χορός depicted by Hephaistos on the shield of Achilles, which is like the one built by Daedalus in Knossos for Ariadne, and in which young men and women perform their dances.)

We seem, then, to have here a fusion of two different traditions about the Muses’ home. A little later the poet Mimnermus explained their coexistence by postulating two groups of Muses, an older group of three whose father was Ouranos, and the younger, more familiar troupe of nine whose father was Zeus. Others asserted that the Pierian nine were not goddesses at all, but the beautiful daughters of a Macedonian man called Pieros (see Pausanias IX.29.1-5). At any rate, one tradition known to Hesiod placed them in the north, where they are linked to the legend of Orpheus, and the other on Mount Helikon; and they had cult centres in many other places too. We may guess that myths about musical goddesses arose in several parts of the Greek world and were gradually brought together, just as is the case with many other deities. But I shall not speculate about that. What I want to emphasise is something they have in common, that this idealised company of singers and dancers is always placed outside the civilised world, in the wild places on mountains, among the rocky peaks and streams and forests. As we shall see later, they sometimes sing in the palace of the gods on Olympus, and in the human world their sanctuaries were often close to cities or even inside them; but their imagined lives are not centred on the cities like those of the Olympians and some minor divinities, nor on the cultivated farmlands, and their homes are not in temples or houses or palaces. This is a feature they share with all other groups of beautiful, immortal young women, Charites, Oreads, Oceanides, Nereids, and so on, and with any number of nymphs of the hills and woodlands. In origin, all these beings are spirits of the untamed world of nature, and

the Muses in particular are creatures of the mountain-tops and springs. We may reasonably wonder how it came about that these nature-spirits, who personify the living power of wild places and have nothing to do with human civilisation, came to be identified as the supreme performers of the sophisticated arts of choral singing and dancing; but I shall make no attempt to answer that question here.

Let us move on now, and consider their music more directly. The first musical activity we hear about in the *Theogony* is their dancing on Mount Helikon, around a spring and the altar of Zeus (3-4); and the ‘lovely *χόροι*’ they perform on the mountain-peak in lines 7-8 are evidently thought of as dances too; they perform them with ‘vigorous feet’, *ἐπερρώσαντο δὲ ποσσίν*. These are circle-dances, each of which takes place in a single location around a centre - a spring, an altar, a mountain-peak. In Greek music-making this circular choral formation was very common, long before the name *κύκλιος χορός* (‘circular chorus’) was assigned to the special case of the dithyramb; it is often mentioned in poetry and appears on many vase-paintings from the geometric period onwards. There are two splendid examples in Homer, in the descriptions of a scene on Achilles’ shield at *Iliad* 18. 590-606, and of the dances of the Phaeacians at *Odyssey* 8.246-267. In neither of these cases do the circling performers sing; they are simply dancers, just like the Muses on Helikon. In *Iliad* 18 we are not told about anything fixed that marks the centre of the circle, but in the *Odyssey* the central position is taken by the bard Demodocus; it is he alone that produces the musical sounds that accompany them, playing his *phorminx* and singing as they dance. This placement of a chorus and their accompanist is also extremely common. In exactly the same way, in Pindar’s account of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis in *Nemean* 5, the Muses are in a circle and in the centre is Apollo, ‘driving his seven-tongued *phorminx* with a golden plectrum and leading them in songs of every sort’ (*Nem.* 5.22-5). In Pindar’s poem, however, the Muses are singing, and if they dance the fact is not mentioned (we shall come back to their singing shortly). What we should notice, however, is that although Apollo is the leader, *ἀγείτο παντοίων νόμων*, and although in the *Odyssey* the dancers are spurred into action by Demodocus’ playing, the poet focusses our attention firmly on the activities of the chorus; in *Iliad* 18 their leader or accompanist is not even mentioned, and in *Odyssey* 8 what gives the audience most delight is the extraordinary skill of the dancers.

Circle-dances of the kinds performed by the Muses on Helikon and by these choruses in Homer are complete works of art and astonishing spectacles in themselves, even in cases where - so far as we can tell - they involve no audible music at all.

A little later in the *Theogony*, in its second introduction, we find a hint of another kind of dancing (68-71). Hesiod has just mentioned the Muses' singing in the place where they have their home; and he continues: 'Then they went to Olympus with ambrosial song, delighting in their beautiful voice; and the dark earth echoed with their singing, and a lovely thudding sound (*δοῦπος*) arose from their feet as they went to their father.' Here they are no longer circling around a fixed point but are travelling from one place to another. Most of the description refers to their singing, but the beating of their feet on the ground is another ingredient in their music-making. The fact that it is an essential and aesthetically delightful part of their activity is brought out in the adjective attached to the noun; the *δοῦπος* that rises up from their feet is *ἐρατός*, redolent of love (*ἐρώς*), charming and desirable. It seems to me that if the Muses' footwork is something which is aesthetically appreciated, their movements here must also count as a kind of dance; it is of the general type known as the 'processional', which we know about from descriptions of wedding-processions, from episodes such as the progress of Apollo and his kidnapped band of Cretan sailors to Delphi in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* (513-523), from literary and iconographic evidence about various religious rituals (for instance those involved in the cult of Artemis Orthia at Sparta), and from many other sources.

A rather later account of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis gives us an colourful description of a procession of the Muses; it comes from a play written near the end of the fifth century, the *Iphigeneia Aulidensis* of Euripides. 'What a cry of joy Hymenaios roused up with the Libyan *lōtos*, the *kithara* that loves the dance, and the reeds of the *syrinx*, when the Muses with their beautiful hair, beating their golden-sandalled footprint upon the ground, came up Mount Pelion to the marriage of Peleus among the feasting of the gods, praising Thetis and the son of Aiakos in melodious sounds all through the woods of Pelion on the mountains of the Centaurs' (*Iph. Aul.* 1036-1047). Here the Muses have an accompaniment to their singing, played on three different kinds of instrument, the *lōtos* (a variety of the *aulos*), the large lyre called the

kithara and the *syrinx* or Pan-pipe; and we hear of exactly the same instruments being played in wedding-processions elsewhere too, for instance in the sixth-century poem called *The Shield of Herakles* (270-285), traditionally but wrongly attributed to Hesiod. What seems intriguing in both the processions of Muses I have mentioned is that they do not focus on the spectacle of the dance, as the descriptions of the circle-dances do, but only on its sounds, the thud of the Muses' feet in the *Theogony* and the sound of them 'beating their golden-sandalled footprint on the ground', *χρυσεοσάνδαλον ἦχος ἐν γῇ κρούουσαι*, in Euripides. At the same time there is singing, in both of these texts, and in the *Iphigeneia* there is also the sound of the instruments. In these examples the role of the dancers' feet is not to be a visible spectacle, but to contribute a rhythmic beat, like a percussion instrument, to the musical ensemble; and in both cases this impression is reinforced by the fact that the principal audience is at some distance from the performers, in the halls of Olympus or already revelling at the wedding-feast.

Of course I don't mean to imply that Greek musical processions were never appreciated as visual spectacles, or that musical sounds were always unimportant in the performances of circular choruses; that would obviously be nonsense. I have highlighted the different treatments of dance in these passages only as a way of emphasising some rather different conclusions. First, dancing was thought of not only as spectacle but also, more surprisingly, as a source of musically significant sound. Secondly, dancing as well as singing was conceived, from the earliest times we know of, as an art in the province of the Muses (whose range was later expanded further, to include purely intellectual disciplines such as philosophy). It is an art which the Muses do not merely patronise but also perform, and it is as much a form of 'music', as the Greeks experienced and imagined it, as were the arts whose medium was the sound of voices and instruments. Thirdly, it was an art whose products were often combined with music in the familiar sense of that word; but it was perfectly capable of standing alone as a purely visual manifestation of music, without any help from an audible accompaniment. It is worth noticing that dancing is not only central to the performances of the Muses, but is placed even more strongly in the foreground in descriptions of the performances of other immortal women. The Charites in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* (194 ff.), along with the Horae, Harmonia, Hebe, Aphrodite and others, dance but do not sing; at Euripides *Phoenissae* 789 the Charites are

χοροποιοί, ‘leaders’ or ‘creators’ of the dance; in the same dramatist’s *Iphigenia Tauridensis* (1146) the whirling dances of girls are called ‘contests of the Charites’; and in Aristophanes, at *Thesmophoriazousae* 120-1, Agathon sings of the ‘well-rhythmed whirlings of the Charites and their Phrygian-dancing feet’; but the Charites very rarely sing. Similarly, we hear repeatedly of the dances of the Nereids, as at Euripides *Ion* 1080-86, *Iph. Taur.* 421-9, and *Iph. Aul.* 1057, but again, there is nothing to suggest that they are singing; their music consists in their dancing. It is clear, too, that dance without songs or instruments was not just a figment of the poets’ imagination but a feature of real human culture, as we can see, for instance, from Plato’s condemnation of it at *Laws* 669d (a work in which the cultural role of dancing is very prominent), and much later in Aristides Quintilianus’ reference to ψιλὴ ὄρχησις, ‘unaccompanied dancing’, at *De mus.* 31.28. The equal status of the audible and the visible in music appears also in Aristides’ definition of musical knowledge as ‘knowledge of what is fitting in sounds and bodily movements (σωματικαὶ κινήσεις)’ (4.22-3), and in his statement that the ‘matter’ of which music is composed is sound and the movement of the body (5.19); similarly Aristoxenus in his *Rhythmics* (2.9) puts bodily movement on the same level as words and melody as one of the three ingredients that are ‘made rhythmical’ in music.

The first allusion in the *Theogony* to the Muses’ singing comes in lines 9-10. When they had performed their dances on the mountain, ‘they rose up from there, veiled in thick cloud, and went through the night giving voice most beautifully’. It is a charming image, based no doubt on the poet’s observation of the clouds and mist that form around the mountain-top as darkness falls; but it does not tell us much about what their singing was like. In the next group of lines, down to line 21, we learn that they sang in praise of the gods and the whole race of immortals, nineteen of whose names are listed. Their song, then, was an enormously extended hymn to the gods, imagined, perhaps, as a complete sequence of pieces similar to the Homeric *Hymns*; but we can say little more about it.

A few lines later, however, at the beginning of the second introduction (36-52), we find another description of a performance of this sort, in which the Muses celebrate the gods and other immortal powers; and this one gives us a few hints not just about

the subject of their song but also about the qualities of their singing. The first hint comes in line 39, where they are said to sing *φωνῇ ὁμηρεῦσαι*. *ὁμηρεῦσαι* comes from the rather rare verb *ὁμηρέω*; it is the Ionic form of the participle which in Attic would be *ὁμηροῦσαι*. The basic sense of the verb is apparently ‘to meet’, the meaning it clearly has, for instance, at *Odyssey* 16.468. In some other texts it means ‘to follow’, and is glossed by one of the ancient lexicographers as equivalent to the usual Greek word for ‘following’, *ἀκολουθεῖν*. According to the modern dictionaries, however, in this passage of Hesiod it is being used metaphorically, and conveys the notion of ‘agreement’ or ‘unanimity’. If the Muses are ‘agreeing with the voice’, the implication, presumably, is that they are all singing the same thing at the same time in unison, and this seems likely enough; it is the interpretation which most editors and translators adopt. But we should notice that the passage would be unique in using the verb in this way, and we might consider the possibility that Hesiod was not after all giving the verb a ‘metaphorical’ meaning unparalleled elsewhere, but intended it in one of its more regular senses. If he did, we might draw a very different conclusion. The statement that the Muses are ‘meeting with voice (or sound)’ could perhaps be interpreted as painting the same picture as the statement that they are ‘agreeing’, though this meaning is not immediately obvious; but the statement that they are ‘following with voice or sound’ cannot possibly be understood in that way. It suggests something more like antiphonal singing, where one voice ‘follows’ another, as in some well-known forms of lament, or in the musical games played at symposia. Some encouragement for this interpretation comes from *Iliad* 1.604 and *Hymn to Apollo* 189, where in both cases the Muses are described as *ἀμειβόμεναι ὀπὶ καλῇ*, ‘answering with a beautiful voice’. This certainly suggests that they are responding to one another in an antiphonal style, though that impression is undercut in the *Hymn to Apollo* (but not in the *Iliad*) by the phrase *ᾅμα πᾶσαι*, ‘all together’, which appears in the same line. We shall meet the same phrase again later in another reference to the Muses, where an ‘antiphonal’ interpretation is almost certainly correct; but here too there is a problem, since it is not clear whether the Muses are ‘answering’ one another, or are responding all together to another group of performers. It is hard to be confident about the meaning of any these passages, and in the case of the *Theogony* the antiphonal interpretation may seem unlikely; but we should at least take note of

the expression's ambiguity and not automatically accept the usual view of it. We shall return to the issue briefly at the end of this paper.

Next, in lines 39-40, we are told that their sweet voice flows tireless from their mouths, ἀκάματος ῥέει αὐδὴ / ἐκ στομάτων ἡδεῖα. 'Sweet', ἡδεῖα, means nothing much by itself, but the image of a sweet voice flowing like liquid from the Muses' mouths has some definite content. The comparison between song and a sweet liquid is quite common in Greek poetry and especially in Pindar; there is a striking example, for instance, in the last antistrophe of *Nemean* 3.

χαῖρε, φίλος· ἐγὼ τόδε τοι
πέμπω μεμειγμένον μέλι λευκῷ
σὺν γάλακτι, κιρναμένα δ' ἔερσ' ἀμφέπει,
πόμ' αἰοίδιμον αἰόλισσιν ἐν πνοαῖσιν αὐλῶν.

'Greetings, friend: to you

I send this honey mixed

with white milk, with mingled foam upon it,

a drink of song on the shimmering breaths of *auloi*' (*Nem.* 3.76-9).

Something similar, I think, is suggested by *Theogony* 39-40; the Muses' song is as appetising as a delicious drink. More concretely, the 'tireless flow' points to two aspects of the singing; first, it is not just a short snatch of song but goes on for a long time, and the Muses' voices are just as fresh at the end as at the beginning; and secondly, it flows continuously, like a river or like honey poured from a jar, without gaps between individual sounds. Just so, when the theorists try to convey the attributes of musical melody, they tell us that one note follows another without any time-gap between them, συνεχῶς κατὰ τὸν χρόνον, 'continuously in time', as Aristoxenus puts it (*El harm.* 8.30).

The next part of Hesiod's description of the Muses' song contains the most fascinating phrase in the passage. 'And the house of their father Zeus the loud-thunderer laughs with the lily-like voice as it is scattered, ὅπῃ λειριόεσση / σκιδναμένη, and the peaks of snowy Olympus and the homes of the immortals resound' (40-43). The image of laughter evidently evokes joyfulness, and the 'scattering' of the voice and the 'resounding' or 'echoing' of the buildings and the mountain-top tell us that the sound is strongly projected and carries a long way. The really interesting word,

however, is λειριόεσσα, ‘like a lily’; we may well be puzzled by the idea that the sound of singing voices has the same quality as the white blossom of a plant. Or at least we would be puzzled if we didn’t know that the same adjective is used by Homer to describe the sound of the cicadas, at *Iliad* 3.152; the old men of Troy sit around chattering, τεττίγεσσιν ἐοικότες, οἳ τε καὶ ὕλην / δεινδρέω ἐφεζόμενοι ὅπα λειριόεσσαν ἰεῖσι, ‘like cicadas, which sit on a tree and send out their lily-like voice’. Similar usages reappear in later poetry, with the form λείριος or λειρός instead of λειριόεις, for instance in Apollonius of Rhodes *Argonautica* 4.903 and in a neat (though biologically inaccurate) verse inscription of unknown authorship and date, τέττιξ γλυκεροῖς χεῖλεσι λειρὰ χέων, ‘the cicada, pouring out lily-like song from its sweet lips’. Not all of us, perhaps, find the noise made by the cicadas very agreeable, but these descriptions are evidently intended to convey an image of charm and delightfulness, and there seems to be a special affinity between the Muses and the cicadas. Plato’s Socrates relates a charming little myth explaining how these insects came to be singers and followers of the Muses, and serve as the goddesses’ messengers (*Phaedrus* 259b-d), and at 262d he calls them ‘prophets of the Muses’, Μουσῶν προφῆται. When they are not applied to sounds, adjectives meaning ‘lily-like’ can be used of aspects of a person’s body or their appearance, as at *Iliad* 13.830, where Hector threatens to thrust his spear into the ‘lily-like skin’ (χρόα λειριόεντα) of Ajax, and at Bacchylides 17.95, where the Athenians who sailed to Crete with Theseus shed tears ‘from their lily-like eyes’, κατὰ λειριῶν ὀμμάτων.

What we are looking for, then, is a quality that can be found equally in lilies, the Muses’ voices, the sounds of the cicadas, the skin or flesh of Ajax and the eyes of the weeping heroes. A passage in Hesiod’s *Works and Days* may give some help; it refers to the time of year when the ἡχέτα τέττιξ / δεινδρέω ἐφεζόμενος λιγυρὴν καταχέυετ’ αἰοιδὴν (582-3), ‘the resounding cicada sits on a tree and pours down its *liguros* song’. This passage has some similarities with the one in the *Theogony*; in the *Theogony* the mountain peaks and the home of the gods resound (ἡχεῖ), and the cognate adjective ἡχέτα, ‘resounding’, is used to describe the cicada in *Works and Days* (the cicada is described as ἡχέτα also in the *Shield of Heracles*, line 393); and just as the voice of the Muses is said to ‘flow’, ῥέει, the cicada’s song is ‘poured down’, καταχέυεται. Perhaps, then, λειριόεις has a similar meaning to the adjective

used here of the cicada's voice, *λιγυρός*, which like its relation *λιγύς* refers to sounds that are thin and high-pitched, light and delicate. 'Delicacy' may in fact be the attribute which is most nearly appropriate to all these cases. It is true, of course, that Ajax was a tough warrior, and we may imagine him as having coarse skin and a hairy chest; but Hector is being sarcastic and deliberately provocative, and a sneering comment on the contrast between his 'delicate skin' and the hard thrust of a bronze-tipped spear suits his purpose very well. The allusion in the *Theogony* too, like the one in the *Iliad*, gains meaning and emphasis from contrast, in this case the contrast between the 'lily-like' voice of the Muses and the roaring of loud-thundering Zeus, *Ζηνὸς ἐριγδούποιο*, in the same line.

We can conclude, then that the sound of the singing of an idealised girls' chorus is continuous and flowing, that it is high-pitched and delicate, at the furthest possible remove from the deep rumbling of the thunder, and that at the same time it has a penetrating, carrying quality which will resonate and scatter itself all around. These attributes, none of which is surprising in itself, may help to explain why the Muses' singing can appropriately be compared with the continuous, high-pitched, thin and penetrating noise of the chirping cicadas, which can completely pervade the environment.

The performances we have been talking about so far take place in the open air, and either there is no audience, or else, in the case of the procession to Olympus, the audience is at a distance and hears the sound as they approach. What happens, then, when they arrive in the halls of Zeus? Hesiod does not tell us, but there is a splendid description in the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, lines 188-206. Apollo has just arrived, and the gods' thoughts turn immediately to lyre-playing and singing. The Muses strike up their song, *ἅμα πᾶσαι ἀμειβόμεναι ὀπὶ καλῶ*, 'answering all together with their beautiful voice', a phrase which we have glanced at already; and they sing of the pleasures of the immortals and the miseries of human beings. The gods show no concern at all for human sufferings; this is a song of celebration, and the gods greet it with merriment and dancing. The Charites, the Horae, Harmonia, Hebe and Aphrodite dance, 'holding one another's hands by the wrist', a posture we sometimes see in vase paintings, in depictions of the circle dance. Along with them dances

Artemis, one of the greatest of the immortals, as the poet remarks, describing her as tall and εἶδος ἀγῆτην, ‘admirable in form’; and two of the male gods, Ares and Hermes, are said to be ‘playing’, παίζουσι, among these dancing goddesses. (There is no allusion here to Hermes’ musical skills; he is given his epithet Ἀργειφόντης, ‘killer of Argos’ the many-eyed monster, perhaps to make him seem a suitable playmate for the bloodthirsty Ares.) Apollo plays his lyre (ἐγκιθαρίζει), while pacing with fine, high steps, καλὰ καὶ ὕψι βιβάζ, and around him shines a radiance, to which are added the sparklings (μαρμαρυγαί) of his feet and his finely woven tunic.

This time, it seems, the Muses do not dance; we are told only about their singing, which inspires the other gods to dance. The dancers are distinguished into four different groups, all doing different things. There is first the group of ten goddesses (three Charites and four Horae, together with Harmonia, Hebe and Aphrodite) who hold one another by the wrist. Then, among them but clearly distinguished from them and apparently not part of the circle of hand-holders there is the single, dignified figure of Artemis, marked out as a special case by three lines of respectful description. Next there are the two gods, Ares and Hermes, who ‘play’ among them; and finally there is Apollo, dancing too with his ‘fine, high steps’ and sparkling feet, but also accompanying the dance and song on his lyre. The picture is completed by a reference to the audience, Zeus and Leto, who sit and enjoy the spectacle.

This is a complicated scenario, and we are not told exactly how we should imagine it. The poet does not explain how the singing Muses and the main circle of dancers are placed in relation to one another, for instance, or whether Apollo is in the middle of the circle, as we would expect, or somewhere else. Nor do we know exactly what Artemis is doing. She is somehow superior to the other dancers, and we might compare her with the human figure of Hagesichora, who is in some sense the leader of the girls’ chorus in Alcman’s famous first *partheneion*; but the analogy is not close enough to be informative. Perhaps Artemis is conceived in a similar way in one of the Homeric hymns to Artemis, *Hymn 27*, where she is said to ‘organise’, ἄρτυνέουσα, the chorus of Muses and Charites at Delphi when she has finished hunting. She hangs up her bow and arrows, and after dressing in beautiful clothes she ‘leads the choruses’, ἡγέειται ... ἐξάρχουσα χορούς, while the Muses and Charites (but not Artemis herself)

sing with an ambrosial voice. We may notice that none of the Olympian gods except Apollo is said to sing in any of these performances, or in any comparable situations elsewhere, though Hermes does so in a very different situation, depicted in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*. In most large-scale performances by the immortals Apollo and the Muses are the only singers (occasionally, as in the *Hymn to Artemis*, the Charites sing too, but that is unusual). But all the gods dance, except Zeus himself and his current wife (Leto in the *Hymn to Apollo*, more usually Hera). The ‘playing’ of the two male gods among the dancers in the *Hymn to Apollo* has a parallel, I think, in the two acrobatic tumblers, *κυβιστητῆρες*, of *Iliad* 18. 605-6, in a scene on the shield of Achilles, who are also described as ‘leaders of the dance’, and who whirl about in the middle of the dancers, *ἐδίνεον κατὰ μέσσους*. Comically gesticulating figures who may correspond to these tumblers can be found in some sixth-century vase paintings.

It looks as if all the ingredients of the picture painted in the *Hymn to Apollo* can be found elsewhere, though it is difficult to fit them together into a coherent image. But it poses a problem of another kind too. We think of the Muses, when they are singing and dancing, as the perfect, divine counterparts of a human chorus of young women, whose songs and dances are described in many later texts - choruses like Alcman’s, or the Delian maidens, or the girls who danced in honour of Artemis and Athena in classical times. The situation in the *Hymn to Apollo* is quite different. The Muses are a choir of noble maidens singing in a king’s court, and the dancers are the aristocratic guests at the feast. Performances like this have no parallel in any real Greek setting we know of, certainly not in the cities of the fifth century, and not even, so far as I have been able to discover, in the opulent courts of tyrants like Polycrates of Samos in the sixth century or Hieron of Syracuse in the fifth. There was certainly plenty of singing and dancing on these occasions, but I know of no evidence that choruses made up from the daughters of the nobility were ever involved, or that women comparable in status to Artemis and Aphrodite at the court of Zeus were among the dancers. The picture must have seemed strange, perhaps foreign and ‘oriental’, even to Greeks familiar with the tyrants’ courts.

I have already mentioned the performances of the Muses at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, which the poets so often describe. There is one other kind of performance in

which they take part and which deserves some attention. This is the funeral lament. There is a good example at *Odyssey* 24.58-62, part of the description of the funeral of Achilles, where the ghost of Agamemnon is speaking to the ghost of Achilles. ‘Around you stood the daughters of the old man of the sea [i.e. the Nereids], lamenting piteously, wearing immortal garments, and the nine Muses sang a dirge (*θρήνηον*), answering with a beautiful voice (*ἀμειβόμεναι ὀπὶ καλῇ*). You could not have seen even one of the Argives without tears in his eyes, so moving was the clear-voiced Muse, *Μοῦσα λίγεια*.’

I shall not discuss the lament in detail; its basic contours are well known and the essential points are straightforward. They can be extracted without much difficulty from the Trojans’ lament for Hector at *Iliad* 24.719-776. The formal lament, the *θρήνος*, was antiphonal in structure and involved two distinct groups of performers. In the lament for Hector there seem to be two stages; in the first the ‘leaders’, *ἑξάρχοντες*, of the lament are called *ᾠδοί* (the Homeric term for ‘minstrels’ or ‘bards’) and must be professional singers, while in the second the leaders are three women intimately connected with Hector - his wife Andromache, his mother Hekabe, and finally Helen. In both stages the second part is taken by a group of unidentified women. The leaders chant a coherent song of lament with intelligible words, and the chorus of women answer them with a wailing cry, to which no words are assigned.

The situation in the *Odyssey* is less clear. Again we seem to have two groups, the Muses and the Nereids. The Nereids are relatives of the dead man, like Andromache, Hekabe and Helen in the *Iliad*, since they are sisters of his mother, Thetis. The Muses fall into the category of expert singers, even if they are not exactly ‘professionals’ like the *Iliad*’s *ᾠδοί*. So we might assume that this is another two-stage performance in which first the Muses and then the Nereids sing, and both groups are answered by the cries of the weeping onlookers. But there are difficulties here, and it is not clear that this is quite what is being described. The antiphonal lament is a *θρήνος*, and it is only the Muses who *θρήνεον*, ‘sing a lament’, in this passage; and it is only their singing that moves the attendant Greeks to tears. The Nereids are relatives of the dead man, like Andromache and Hekabe, but they do not appear to be ‘leaders’ like those Trojan ladies, only wailing respondents. Yet if the Muses were leading the lament and the

Nereids were responding to their singing, we would expect the Muses' contribution to be mentioned first, whereas in fact it is the other way round, and we are not in fact told that the Nereids answer them. On the contrary, it is the Muses who are said to 'answer' with their voices, just as they are in several texts which I mentioned earlier. At first sight we might suppose that they are answering the Nereids, but this would be very odd in the context, since the Muses are the great singers and the Nereids do nothing but weep. There is another possibility; perhaps they are divided into two semichoruses which reply to one another. We have already noticed that the phrase *ἀμειβόμεναι ὀπί καλῇ*, 'answering with a beautiful voice', is one that seems to be quite routinely attached to them, no matter what kind of singing is involved, and no matter whether or not there are other performers present for them to 'reply' to. Does this mean that they are always, or at least very commonly envisaged as singing antiphonally in semichoruses, or is it just a formulaic phrase which hardly has any meaning at all?

It is impossible to be certain, but the hypothesis that the phrase has completely lost its connection with the concept of 'answering' strikes me as impossible. The verb *ἀμείβομαι* is very familiar in epic, in phrases like *τὸν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη ...* ('and answering him, he said ...'), and in these cases the translation 'answering' is certainly correct. But the essential meaning of the verb in this form is 'to take turns', 'to alternate'. Thus two dancers 'dance in turn', *ὀρχεΐσθην ... ἀμειβομένω* at *Odyssey* 8.378-9, and the ferocious bulls yoked by Jason walk *χαλκείαις ὀπλαῖς ... ἀμειβόμενοι*, 'with alternate steps of their bronze hooves' at Pindar *Pythian* 4.226 - that is, when a bull walks, it steps first with one pair of diagonally opposite legs, then with the other. The sense of 'taking turns' is of course still there in the routine epic formula for 'answering' in speech, and I do not believe that it can have been totally eliminated from the formula attached to the Muses. We cannot avoid the conclusion that they 'take turns' or 'alternate' with their voices on all the occasions where this form of words appears. Two things seem to follow from that: first, that our idealised chorus of young women is regularly divided into groups who sing in turn, and at least often does not perform in unison as a single unit; and secondly that at the funeral of Achilles in the *Odyssey* it may be the Muses who provide not only the leading part but

also the response in the antiphonal lament. In that case the Nereids are irrelevant; they are merely weeping by-standers.

I shall not try to draw any large conclusions from this short survey of the Muses' musical activities. It is worth pointing out, however, that descriptions of their performances do not only give us information about this one small facet of Greek mythology, intriguing though it is. The poets' descriptions must have been based on their knowledge of the music of the Muses' human counterparts, the choruses of girls which played significant parts in the cultural and religious lives of Greek communities, especially in Sparta; and they can guide us towards a better understanding of these historically real phenomena. Remnants of the songs that were composed for girls' choruses, the *partheneia*, survive among the fragmentary works of several major Greek poets, notably Alcman and Pindar, and several modern scholars (especially Claude Calame) have studied them intensively. But our direct evidence about them is seriously limited, and although the Muses' music has also been discussed many times in the past, I suspect that further examination of the intricacies of their performances might still yield new insights into the characteristics of the dances and songs which the poets themselves had witnessed.